3.1C: Cultural Universals

Learning Objectives

- Discuss cultural universals in terms of the various elements of culture, such as norms and beliefs

The sociology of culture concerns culture—usually understood as the ensemble of symbolic codes used by a society—as it is manifested in society. The elements of culture include (1) symbols (anything that carries particular meaning recognized by people who share the same culture); (2) language (system of symbols that allows people to communicate with one another); (3) values (culturally-defined standards that serve as broad guidelines for social living); (4) beliefs (specific statements that people hold to be true); and (5) norms (rules and expectations by which a society guides the behavior of its members). While these elements of culture may be seen in various contexts over time and across geography, a cultural universal is an element, pattern, trait, or institution that is common to all human cultures worldwide. Taken together, the whole body of cultural universals is known as the human condition. Among the cultural universals listed by Donald Brown (1991) are abstract speech, figurative speech and metaphors, antonyms and synonyms, and units of time.
First-Cousin Marriage Laws in the U.S.: In states marked dark blue, first-cousin marriage is legal. Light blue signifies that it is legal but has restrictions or exceptions. Pink signifies that it is banned with exceptions; red signifies that it is banned via statute, and dark red signifies that it is a criminal offense.

The concept of a cultural universal has long been discussed in the social sciences. Cultural universals are elements, patterns, traits, or institutions that are common to all human cultures worldwide. There is a tension in cultural anthropology and cultural sociology between the claim that culture is a universal (the fact that all human societies have culture), and that it is also particular (culture takes a tremendous variety of forms around the world). The idea of cultural universals—that specific aspects of culture are common to all human cultures—runs contrary to cultural relativism. Cultural relativism was, in part, a response to Western ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism may take obvious forms, in which one consciously believes that one people’s arts are the most beautiful, values the most virtuous, and beliefs the most truthful. Franz Boas argued that one’s culture may mediate and thus limit one’s perceptions in less obvious ways. He understood “culture” to include not only certain tastes in food, art, and music, or beliefs about religion but instead assumed a much broader notion of culture.

Among the cultural universals listed by Donald Brown, some of these were investigated by Franz Boas. For example, Boas called attention to the idea that language is a means of categorizing experiences, hypothesizing that the existence of different languages suggests that people categorize, and thus experience, language differently. Therefore, although people may perceive visible radiation the same way, in terms of a continuum of color, people who speak different languages slice up this continuum into discrete colors in different ways.

Key Points

- Cultural universals are elements, patterns, traits, or institutions that are common to all human cultures worldwide.
- There is a tension in cultural anthropology and cultural sociology between the claim that culture is a universal and that it is also particular. The idea of cultural universals runs contrary in some ways to cultural relativism which was, in part, a response to Western ethnocentrism.
- Ethnocentrism may take obvious forms. For example, the belief that one people’s culture is the most beautiful and true. Franz Boas understood “culture” to include not only certain tastes in food, art, and music, or beliefs about religion but instead assumed a much broader notion of culture.
- Among the cultural universals listed by Donald Brown (1991) are abstract speech, figurative speech and metaphors, antonyms and synonyms, and units of time.
- Among the cultural universals listed by Brown, some were investigated by Franz Boas. For example, Boas saw language as a means of categorizing experiences. Thus, although people may perceive visible radiation similarly, people who speak different languages slice up the continuum in different ways.
- Since Franz Boas, two debates have dominated cultural anthropology.

Key Terms

- **culture**: The beliefs, values, behavior, and material objects that constitute a people’s way of life.
- **particular**: A specific case; an individual thing as opposed to a whole class.
- **universal**: Common to all society; worldwide.